



Above: Whitetail fawns near Missoula  
LAURA VERHAEGHE



Top: Newborn bison  
KEN CONGER



Left: Grizzly bear cub  
STEVE LUFT



Above right: Black bear cub  
LINDA KELLY

# Too Cute for Words

Though we do need a few to explain just why baby animals are so adorable.

By Jim Pashby

Why do so many of us go all mushy over baby animals, even feeling compelled to pick one up and cuddle it in our arms? Because, deep down, they remind us of human babies.

And we go all mushy over human babies because we're biologically programmed to find them adorable and provide the attention and

protection they need to survive and perpetuate the human species.

Human infants' proportions—the oversized head, the tiny nose and mouth, and, especially, the massive eyes—are primarily what trigger

our “Awww, so cute” response. In 1943, Austrian ethologist and zoologist Konrad Lorenz described these physiological traits as “baby schema.” Because most baby animals also have these features—even newly hatched rattlesnakes—we are hard-wired

*Below:* Ruddy duckling  
**SHARON DEWART-HANSEN**

*Bottom:* Canada goose and goslings  
**DAWN WILSON**      *Right:* Sandhill crane colt and adult  
**KATE HOLLEY**



*Top:* Northern pike fingerlings  
**PAUL VECSEI**

*Left:* Black bullhead fingerlings, Yellowstone River  
**NATHAN COOPER**

*Above:* Columbia spotted frog tadpoles  
**BECCA WOOD**

to respond the same way we do toward human babies. Scientists suspect that the powerful human nurturing instinct makes us programmed

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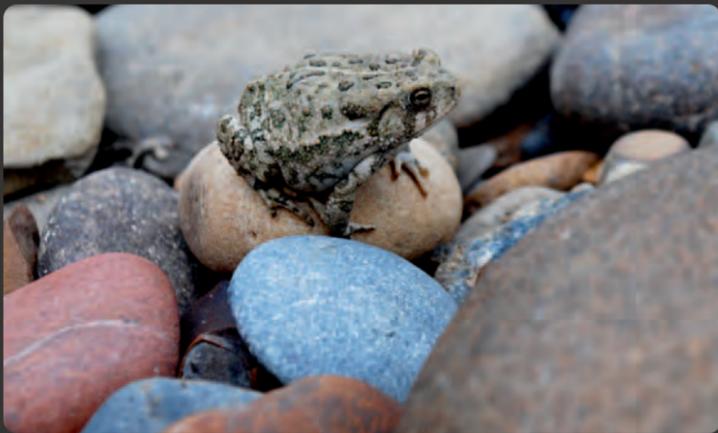
to feel warm fuzzies for anything that vaguely resembles our own offspring.

Children, especially, are attracted to baby schema, and manufacturers respond with toys like Hello Kitty and cartoon characters like Disney's

Simba, all saucer eyes and balloon heads.

Scientists mapping brain activity have documented how the sight of baby animals triggers human feelings, according to Eloise Stark of the University of Oxford psychiatry department. She

told the BBC, "We know that there is a really fast burst of activity in the orbitofrontal cortex, an area of the brain involved in reward," she said. "We think this early activity biases the brain toward processing the cute stimulus—for



*Right:* Raccoon kit, Liberty County  
**CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM**

*Below:* Northern river otter pup  
**DOUG TATE**



*Top left:* Woodhouse's toadlet, Missouri River Breaks National Monument  
**BRIAN TORNABENE**

*Middle left:* Juvenile greater short-horned lizard  
**DONALD M. JONES**

*Bottom left:* Wolf spider with young  
**KRISTI DUBOIS**

*Top right:* Prairie rattlesnakes with young  
**COLE KIMZEY**

*Middle right:* Baby western spiny softshell turtle  
**JEREMIE HOLLMAN**

*Bottom right:* Northern scorpion with young, Blaine County  
**NATHAN COOPER**



*Left:* Porcupette, Madison County  
**BECCA WOOD**

*Above:* Striped skunk kits, CSKT Bison Range  
**KEN ARCHER**

example, by making sure we give it our full attention. The effect of this may be to approach the infant or cute animal, wanting to pick it up or look after it.”

Other scientists have found that an adorable

baby human or animal stimulates the part of the brain that releases dopamine, a chemical messenger that helps people feel pleasure. Babylike traits, such as curious or naïve play, giggling, or awkward walking also trigger the

brain's chemical reward system.

That's why we melt when watching a moose calf make its first hesitant steps or bear cubs tumble over each other in play. “From the research we have so far, it looks like the cuteness

response is inclusive of everyone, regardless of whether you are a parent or not,” Stark told the BBC. “The cuteness activates the same brain mechanisms, regardless of whether the object is a baby, a puppy, or an object.”



*Above:* Feral foal and mare, Pryor Mountain Wild Horse Range  
**ERIN BRAATEN**

*Below:* Mountain goat nannie and kid  
**DONALD M. JONES**



*Top right:* Bald eagle with eaglets  
**ROSS SWANSON**

*Bottom right:* Common merganser and ducklings  
**RON HOFF**



*Top left:* Mountain bluebird fledglings  
**GILLIAN HADLEY**

*Bottom left:* White-tailed ptarmigan chick and hen  
**KERRY T. NICKOU**

*Middle:* Male loon and loonlet  
**JOHN ASHLEY**

So go ahead and gush, coo, go weak in the knees, and make sad eyes—all those feelings are baked into your DNA. But try to resist the urge to pick up that cute baby whatever. Mom,

likely watching from nearby, might reject her tiny offspring after you touch it, lessening its chances of survival. Your orbitofrontal cortex definitely won't reward you if that happens. 🐾